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McTeague| A study in determinism, romanticism, and fascism

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McTeague: A Study in Determinism, Romanticism, and Fascism

by

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Chapter I
The Thesis Statement

Frank Norris' McTeague has been hailed by most critics as one of the first major naturalistic novels in American literature. Prior to the appearance of Norris and some of his contemporaries, the literature in America was plagued by the sentimental work of the romanticists, and "in 1898 the outlook for American literature was little different from what it had been for a generation. Popular prejudice against a sense of reality in fiction ruled the literary world behind walls that seemed impregnable."[1] Literary figures like William Dean Howells, friend to many a young realistic writer of the period, Stephen Crane, and Hamlin Garland were struggling desperately to achieve a realistic attitude in their own work, as well as encourage it in all of American literature. McTeague was one of the first major books to break through this sentimental barrier, and it was immediately received by many as a great novel. The novel was, at the same time, condemned by others.

Even though McTeague is naturalistic in many respects, Norris also displays some romantic elements, which he apparently could never entirely put aside. In addition, McTeague contains a degree of fascistic philosophy. These fascistic tendencies are often developed accord-

1. Paul H. Bixler, "Frank Norris's Literary Reputation," American Literature, VI (May, 1934), p. 109.

ing to the common interpretation of the "Superman" philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, the late nineteenth-century German philosopher.

Since few critics object to any statement about the novel's being naturalistic, it is hardly necessary to investigate all naturalistic tendencies, but only determinism, the basic philosophy of naturalism. Romantic literature also contains qualities which differentiate it from other fiction. A subjective approach, melodramatic qualities, and a strong belief in the elemental goodness of the individual generally characterize romanticism. For want of a better term, fascism, as used here, includes violence, brutality, and the physical characteristics of the various personages in the story. The philosophy of Nietzsche or, more specifically, the misinterpretation of his philosophy is often the basis of fascism, and examples of this misinterpreted philosophy are evident in McTeague.

Chapter II
Clarifications and Definitions

In order to reach any conclusions to the problems presented by the thesis, some definitions of terms must be agreed upon. The definitions presented here are often quite general, but are usually satisfactory for most critics.

"Norris' realism has the further character which makes it what has come to be designated naturalism. Realism becomes naturalism at the moment when it adopts a philosophy of naturalistic determinism."[1] This definition of naturalism as applied to Frank Norris and other naturalistic writers is generally accepted by all critics.

Determinism is a philosophy denying the existence of free will in the individual. The French novelist Zola was one of the first naturalistic pioneers to express this idea in literature. Lars Åhnebrink has done a fine study showing the direct influence of Zola on Norris' works.[2] Since determinism refuses to recognize free will as a force in human destiny, writers and other followers of this philosophy were forced to choose determinants as explanations for the actions of people and fictitious characters. The Darwinian theory was receiving

1. Ernest Marchand, Frank Norris: A Study (Stanford, 1942), p. 51.
2. The Influence of Émile Zola on Frank Norris (Cambridge, 1947). This study is pertinent to the problems presented here in that it shows Norris' profound interest in the naturalism of Zola's work, which Norris often imitates in his own literature. But as much as Norris might have read and admired Zola, he could not adhere completely to

much attention, and scientific discoveries were beginning to influence the lives of all people. "Science appeared to be something 'real' and demonstrable. Its discoveries and inventions lent weight to its growing prestige; and after 1870 belief in science magnified surprisingly."[3] The formulations of scientific theories and the developments and discoveries of this field prompted an acceptance of environment and heredity as being the driving forces in the lives of men. Later the element of chance was also conceived of as playing a role in man's destiny, and the stifling of free will was complete. These influences—heredity, environment, and chance—may work separately or in unison in altering human life or in forcing an individual to act a particular way.

Heredity is used here in the scientific sense. It designates a quality or characteristic which an individual inherits from his forefathers. Heredity is not limited to individuals, for it was commonly felt at the turn of the century that races of men also have their individual peculiarities. Perhaps the most common trait of races is color, but Norris believed that an individual race may also be characterized by the general temperament of the people—sluggish, hot tempered, calm, brutal, intelligent, remorseless, or any number of other traits—and in physical characteristics other than color.

The environment of any individual is that person's surround-

Zola's philosophy of determinism. In addition, McTeague, which made its first appearance in 1899, indicates that Norris was aware of the effects of chance on human destiny—a fact which Zola either failed to see or ignored for the purposes of his theories in The Experimental Novel, published by the Cassell Publishing Company in English translation in 1893.

3. Harry Hartwick, The Foreground of American Fiction (New York, 1934), p. 46.

ings. It is the people with whom a person associates; it is weather, climate and other geographic forces; it is wealth, poverty, sickness, and health; environment is the influence of the family, the community, and the nation. Any number of concrete and abstract situations such as these form the environment of an individual, and they may influence that individual in many ways depending on other factors.

Chance is any accidental circumstance which may occur in the course of the life of an individual. The fact that an event occurs, when it does, how it does, and the particular way in which it occurs, forces the individual to act in a particular manner to adjust his life to the event itself or the consequences of the event. Chance alone is seldom an explanation for the final act of adjustment on the part of the individual, for the qualities which the person inherits and the particular environmental situation finally force the individual to act in one particular way or another.

Environment, like chance, often works hand in hand with heredity in determining the fate of an individual. It is often difficult to say whether or not an action of an individual is influenced by chance, heredity, or environment, or all three at once. It is not the purpose here to split hairs over the distinction, but to show the influence of all of these factors as they determine the life of the individual.

Since determinism is the basic philosophy behind naturalism, determinism, rather than all of the other characteristics of naturalistic literature, will receive the attention of this study. Generally conceived notions of squalor in the setting, degeneracy in the characters, and defeatism in the theme of naturalistic novels will be ignored

for the purpose of this study unless they have a direct bearing on the problem of determinism. It might be pointed out, for the sake of characters, setting, and theme of naturalistic novels, that

> if naturalism concerns human action as determined by the two forces of heredity and environment, there is no reason why some men of good heredity and fortunate surroundings should not occasionally be brought as a result to positions of success or power. But this is seldom the way of the naturalistic novel. Its characters contain some defect of blood; they are surrounded by adverse circumstance; they suffer mischance; an evil fate hounds them, and in the end they are destroyed.[4]

Since the term "romanticism" has been defined in any number of ways and can, therefore, be defined to suit the specific desires of any particular writer on whatever related topic he may be writing, it is difficult to find a definition on which all critics agree. It has been pointed out that "no writer has been entirely romantic or entirely realistic. . .likewise it is obvious that a great many of the acknowledged realists may be labeled romanticists if one is allowed to define his own terms."[5] No serious attempt will be made to present a definition acceptable to every critic. It might be said that romanticism is concerned with the individual, and that romantic individualism is "a pervasive and widespread faith in the validity of the individual experience and mind as a source of knowledge and a guide to action."[6]

All critics seem to agree that romanticism is concerned with

4. Marchand, p. 56.
5. Franklin Walker, Frank Norris: A Biography (Garden City, 1932), p. 78.
6. Donald Pizer, "Romantic Individualism in Garland, Norris and Crane," American Quarterly, X (Winter, 1958), pp. 463-464.

the individual. In romanticism generally, there seems to be a philosophy expressing an elemental goodness in the individual. There are, however, two different presentations of the individual, and these presentations are widely separated. A high degree of pessimism can be found in the romanticism of Edgar Allen Poe, while Ralph Waldo Emerson envisions a highly optimistic attitude in his romantic works. These differences in the presentation will be classified here, for the sake of simplicity, as "black" romanticism and "white" romanticism, the black variety being the pessimistic tone of presentation, the white being the optimistic.

Romanticism generally possesses a degree of melodrama, and instances of melodramatic scenes will be pointed out in McTeague as a romantic characteristic. As opposed to the objective approach of the naturalistic and realistic novels, the romantic novel uses the subjective approach. This subjectivity, along with melodrama, pessimism, or optimism will be considered among the important traits of romanticism.

Melodrama is usually associated with a display of violent emotions. It entails a tendency toward the sensational and the extravagant. A subjective approach is that technique in fiction writing in which the words, thoughts, and actions of a character reflect the ideas and beliefs of the author. Through one or more of the characters the author may comment on life, social conditions, or other factors which are of vital importance to the author. The subjective approach of the romanticists contrasts quite noticeably with the objectivity of the naturalists and the realists who write completely detached from their subject matter. The naturalists try to paint their picture without

passing moral judgement, without blaming anyone, and without critical comments as to the rightness or wrongness of society and men.

Fascism is a term often associated with Hitler and Mussolini. The philosophy behind the general connotation of the word will be the primary concern for this study. In addition, as the term is used here, fascism expresses a concern for rather self-consciously superior individualism. Fascism pleads for physical strength, stamina, vigor, and health; its emphasis is on individuals who are great in size, stature, physical strength, and strong in human willpower. These ideas commonly led to a belief in the goodness of brutality, violence, and supremacy. There is expressed in this philosophy a desire for the power of one race or class of people over the inferior groups. Generally, the superior group is considered to be the blonde, blue-eyed "Nordic" type. Mussolini, however, felt that the Italians were the superior class, and he built his armies accordingly. To Frank Norris the Anglo-Saxons were supreme, for "it was during his first year at the University of California that the work of Kipling burst on him with the brilliance of a revelation. It became clear to him that civilization was the peculiar property of that branch of the Teutonic race known as Anglo-Saxon."[7] Since fascism often advocates violence and brutality for the purpose of dominance over others, this study will isolate instances of brutality which occur for the pleasure which the individual achieves in dominating a lesser man.

7. Marchand, p. 132.

Chapter III
Deterministic Tendencies of McTeague

That science and its developments were beginning to affect world life at the close of the nineteenth century can hardly be disputed. Scientific methods and discoveries were the concern of theologians, philosophers, and writers, as well as the scientists themselves, and "the Naturalistic school of fiction was an attempt at transferring natural science to the literary field. . .The Naturalistic writer was to seek the truth in the spirit of the scientist. . .Man, [because his fate was determined by heredity, chance and environment], was only a product generated by the struggle for life. Man was transformed in accordance with the surrounding milieu."[1]

Frank Norris, while attending the University of California at Berkeley, became involved in many college functions, but the fact "that Norris's energy was not entirely absorbed by his college activities is made clear by his published writings which reveal his development between the period of the composition of Yvernelle and the time late in his university career when he started an ambitious program of novel-writing under the spur of Zola. . .Zola was chiefly responsible for turning Norris to the novel."[2] Norris was not the only American writer to turn to Zola for guidance. Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, and Jack

1. Åhnebrink, pp. 14-16.
2. Walker, p. 67.

London were trying desperately to dissociate themselves from the sentimental fiction of the romanticists and local color writers of the 1880's. But Garland and Crane "were not even interested in the theory of naturalism, in the scientific jargon out of Claude Bernard, Darwin, and Taine with which Zola and his school bedecked le roman experimental."[3] For some time Norris remained "the most stimulating and militant of our early naturalists—the only one who wrote consciously with a definite creed."[4]

One need not read far into McTeague before one realizes that the influence of Zola is at work. Early in the story, Norris points to McTeague's ancestors. McTeague's mother is "an overworked drudge, fiery and energetic. . .His father dies corroded with alcohol."[5] McTeague undoubtedly inherited some of these qualities from his ancestors. Usually his "mind was as his body, heavy, slow to act, sluggish. Yet there was nothing vicious about the man. Altogether he suggested the draft horse, immensely strong, stupid, docile, obedient."[6] McTeague reveals his mother's energy and fire in the wrestling scene with Marcus and in the murder scene where he seems to lose control over his emotions; and later in the novel, can be seen the disastrous effects of alcohol on McTeague. Alcohol destroys his father, and it helps to force McTeague to kill Trina.

3. Alfred Kazin, On Native Grounds: An Interpretation of Modern American Prose Fiction (New York, 1942), p. 10.
4. Vernon Louis Parrington, The Beginnings of Critical Realism in America: 1860-1920, Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1930), III, p. 329.
5. Frank Norris, McTeague: A Story of San Francisco (Rinehart editions, New York, 1958), p. 2.
6. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

Frequent mention is made of the inherited traits of McTeague's size, strength and stupidity. When the dentist works in his parlors, he works slowly, mechanically; he seldom thinks about his work; his head is often empty of any thought; and he is often able to pull teeth with his fingers, ignoring the use of dental instruments. The customers often speak of McTeague's size; Marcus Schouler remarks to Trina early in the novel about the size and strength of his dentist friend. Trina is later terrified at McTeague's strength, but "she found little to admire in him beyond his physical strength."[7] Finally, partly because of his strength and size, the dentist finds a job moving pianos. At this job he frightens his fellow-workers because of his size, his strength, and his fiery temper aroused by drink. McTeague himself is aware of his physical characteristics and feels he cannot be loved by Trina because he is huge and stupid. In his thoughts he becomes painfully aware of his large, wooden, mallet-like hands. At times, however, he can look with pride at his physical accomplishments. When picnicking, he shows off with his strength in a wrestling match with his friend, Marcus.

Other inherited traits can be found in the character McTeague. Many of these can be very generally classified as instincts or inner urges and inner drives. McTeague, because of his internal makeup which renders him almost senseless to usually irritating noise, is able to keep a noisy canary, which would have been maddening to anyone else. When fixing Trina's broken tooth, early in the novel, McTeague's usually

7. Norris, McTeague, p. 67.

hidden passions get the better of him, and he kisses the girl while she is under the influence of ether. When McTeague tells Marcus that he loves Trina, he adds that he cannot help it. After the picnic, McTeague stays at the Sieppe home, where he sleeps in Trina's bedroom. Sexual instinct compels the giant to press to his face Trina's feminine clothing, which hangs in the closet.

McTeague's animality is frequently aroused. He is put into a rage when Marcus breaks his pipe at the "car conductor's coffee-joint," and he is uncontrollable after Marcus bites his ear in the wrestling match at the picnic. When running from the law, McTeague feels some inner instinct which forces him to move into the desert and prompts him to keep moving. McTeague is not aware of the fact that he is being pursued, but like an animal he is forced by instinct to move to preserve his own life.

Not only in McTeague, but in the other characters as well, can one find effects of heredity. Zerkow, Maria Macapa, and Trina Sieppe are all characterized by a passion for hoarding money. With regard to Trina, Norris says:

> Economy was her strong point. A good deal of peasant blood still ran in her veins, and she had all the instinct of a hardy and penurious mountain race—the instinct which saves without any thought, without idea of consequence—saving for the sake of saving, hoarding without knowing why.[8]

Miss Baker and Old Grannis are deeply in love with each other,

8. Norris, McTeague, p. 99.

but their mentality disallows any intimacy. Finally they are brought together because of psychological drives which they cannot quell, by chance meetings, and through the actions of the people who live in the flat as their neighbors.[9]

Though the role of chance in McTeague is greater than that of environment, it is not so decisive as heredity. Chance often starts an action, enabling the forces of environment and especially heredity to begin. Early in the novel McTeague and Trina are brought together. Norris shows the total force of determinism in discussing the love affair:

> chance had brought them face to face, and mysterious instincts as ungovernable as the winds of heaven were at work knitting their lives together. Neither of them had asked that this thing should be—that their destinies, their very souls, should be the sport of chance. If they could have known, they would have shunned the fearful risk. But they were allowed no voice in the matter.[10]

Trina wins five thousand dollars in a lottery and immediately her inherent desire for hoarding begins to possess her. McTeague "by the greatest good luck secured a position with a manufacturer of surgical instruments."[11] Later by the same luck he loses this position

9. Norris plays on the theme of heredity in The Octopus and in The Pit as well as in McTeague. Magnus Derrick, in The Octopus, possesses a deep sense of justice; Annixter is by nature coarse, crude, and vulgar. Marchand says, however, that "The Octopus is not a completely successful naturalistic novel" (p. 81).

In The Pit, the inherited characteristics of Jadwin seem most obvious. He plays the wheat market, not for the money, but for the pleasure he derives from it.

10. McTeague, p. 66.

11. Ibid., p. 210.

and is forced to look elsewhere for a livelihood. As Trina's penurious nature grows more and more intense, McTeague's cruelty becomes more violent until he finally kills her.

Environment seems to play a lesser role in the actions of the characters in McTeague than do heredity and chance. Many of the actions probably would not have occurred though, had it not been for the matter of environment. McTeague's presence helps to arouse the "woman" in Trina. Thus certain actions take place as a result of environment even though these actions can also be traced to certain inherited traits. McTeague is forced to quit his practice because he has no license; therefore, latent inherited tendencies are aroused in his actions. Maria, by retelling her story of the golden table service again and again, so arouses Zerkow until he finally kills her.

The entire Polk Street society acts upon McTeague and Trina. The car conductor's coffee-joint, Joe Frenna's saloon, the cable cars, all help to shape McTeague's life. It is at Joe Frenna's saloon where McTeague and Marcus have their show of violence. Marcus breaks McTeague's pipe and aims his knife at McTeague's head. The conversation immediately following helps to stir McTeague to try to gain revenge. In the wrestling match scene McTeague, after displaying his enormous strength, begins to feel that he probably is a hero.

> His great success quite turned his head; he strutted back and forth in front of the women, his chest thrown out, and his great mouth perpetually expanded in a triumphant grin. As he felt his strength more and more, he began to abuse it; he domineered over the others, gripping suddenly at their arms till they squirmed with pain, and slapping Marcus on the

> back so that he gasped and gagged for breath.[12]

The observers of the wrestling match are probably as much to blame for McTeague's breaking Marcus' arm as McTeague is himself. The excited words of encouragement offered by those witnessing McTeague's display of violence prompt McTeague to show off his strength even more, so that his pride in his own prowess begins to gain control of his senses. These same words of encouragement directed at McTeague arouse a feeling of jealousy in Marcus who retaliates by biting McTeague's ear. After this incident McTeague completely loses control of his passions, and he "did not strike, he did not know what he was doing."[13]

From these examples it can be seen that Norris was concerned with Zola's naturalistic creed of determinism. This was the first novel to apply the European theory to a distinctively American setting. Also, McTeague "was the first novel that applied Zola's massive technique, his objective approach and his taste for the grotesquely common to a setting that everyone recognized as American."[14]

Naturalist that he was, Norris could not adopt completely the ideas expounded by Zola. Norris "accepted. . .determinism only as it satisfied his dramatic sense."[15] In McTeague Norris is more the artist than the philosopher. His interest in McTeague "was not that of the ethical teacher, the reformer who turns on the light. He re-

12. McTeague, p. 168.
13. Ibid., p. 173.
14. Malcolm Cowley, "Naturalism's Terrible McTeague," New Republic, CXVI (May 5, 1947), p. 32.
15. Alfred Kazin, "Three Pioneer Realists," The Saturday Review of Literature, XX (July 8, 1939), p. 3.

joiced in McTeague and Trina as terms in a literary theorem. Their sufferings led to no conclusions. They are in the book because they appealed to his dramatic sense, his love for character."[16]

Even though this book was not the completely naturalistic novel for which American writers were striving, but which they could not bring themselves to write, McTeague was a heroic advancement of realism in the face of sentimental romanticism. It is certainly true that

> one can discover many phases of naturalism in American fiction—in the moral confusion and dismay of Mark Twain and Harold Frederic, in the harsher forms of realism of E. W. Howe and Hamlin Garland, in the robustious action tales of Frank Norris and Jack London, or in the bold miniatures of Ambrose Bierce and Stephen Crane. But there was no single writer who could be described as a naturalist, no one wholly devoted, before Dreiser, to the philosophy, the material, and the method of Zola.
>
> [Nevertheless], the writers who came nearest to practicing the formula of naturalism at the turn of the century are four: Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London.[17]

Though he apparently admired the naturalistic technique and style and looked to Zola as a literary idol, it can only be concluded that "Norris in identifying himself with the naturalists, revealed a more profound understanding of Zola than he did of naturalism itself. Just as he missed its underlying mood, he failed to accept in its

16. Hamlin Garland, "The Work of Frank Norris," The Critic, XLII (March, 1903), p. 216.

17. Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, Henry Seidel Canby, eds., Literary History of the United States (New York, 1948), II, pp. 1016-1017.

entirety the philosophy back of naturalism."[18]

18. Walker, p. 84.

Chapter IV
McTeague: A Novel from the Romantic Era

If Norris' complete literary career were taken into account, one might tend to agree that "though [his] early naturalism and later potboilers illustrate certain of his permanent interests and qualities of mind, they are apprentice work and are best examined as such."[1] A glance at the sum total of Norris' work would seem to indicate that "at heart Frank Norris was a romanticist."[2] Parrington states that it was "commonly believed that Norris began as a romanticist and worked out of it slowly."[3] But Norris' most romantic work came after he had written McTeague and Vandover and the Brute. In The Octopus, which appeared in 1901, Norris is especially romantic in his presentation.

Critics seem to disagree on the extent of the romanticism in Norris' work. Frederic Taber Cooper states that "in his published work, he. . .only occasionally made concession to his inborn love of romanticism—a weakness that he frankly admitted."[4] Norris himself wrote that "the difficult thing is to get at the life immediately around you—the very life in which you move. No romance in it? No romance in you, poor fool. As much romance on Michigan Avenue as

1. Pizer, p. 468.
2. Charles Caldwell Dobie, "Frank Norris, or, Up from Culture," The American Mercury, XIII (April, 1928), p. 424.
3. 329.
4. "Frank Norris," The Bookman, XVI (December, 1902), p. 334.

there is realism in King Arthur's court."[5]

The whole problem of romanticism and naturalism in all of Norris' career can probably be summed up in this way:

> The most striking fact about Norris and his work is that by temperament, education, and written statement of his philosophy of art, he denies kinship with the realists and allies himself with "Romance."
>
> . . .
>
> He never achieved the discipline of the school to which he was instinctively allied, that of scientific naturalism, because his love of the story for itself was too likely to run away with his ideas about it.[6]

The entire situation becomes extremely complicated as one realizes that "according to [Norris'] definition of the term Zola was a romanticist."[7]

So much for Norris and his over-all career. But what can be said about McTeague? Does it contain romantic moments?

In a critical review which appeared in the same year in which Norris died, it was stated that in McTeague "there is a bad moment when the author is overcome by his lingering passion for the romantic, and indulges himself in a passage of rank melodrama."[8] If one does not care to dispute the assumption on which the statement is based, one might be inclined to agree that "Norris believed himself to be a romanticist, [and] his detailed study of sordid lower-class life

5. The Responsibilities of the Novelist and other Literary Essays (New York, 1903), p. 19.
6. Spiller, et al., pp. 1026-1028.
7. Walker, p. 82.
8. William Dean Howells, "Frank Norris," North American Review, CLXXV (December, 1902), p. 773.

in San Francisco is romance because the life is exceptional."[9]

Although Carvel Collins refers to the symbol of gold as a "familiar Naturalistic use of a dominating symbol,"[10] the symbol of gold which runs throughout the novel is construed by at least one critic to be a decisively romantic element.[11] Parrington feels that other romantic elements include the use of a minor action in the Maria Macapa and Zerkow plot and in the use of foils—Old Grannis and Miss Baker. The latter, Parrington feels, is justified in romantic literature because of the contrast presented—"the self-effacing, timid drawing together contrasted with the brute directness of McTeague. They do not marry and preserve their dream world."[12] Spiller indicates that this subplot of love was "introduced into Norris' original plan with the valid intention of providing contrast but [was] sentimentalized in the conventional fashion."[13] Perhaps the most obvious romantic flaw mentioned by Spiller is "the melodramatic conclusion of pursuit and death in the desert—added later after the manuscript had long lain fallow."[14]

The black romanticism expressed by Poe and others comes very close to the pessimism expressed by the deterministe. Norris, in his portrayal of McTeague, often draws upon this pessimism in picturing a human being in a helpless state. McTeague, afraid of hurting his

9. C. Hartley Grattan, "Frank Norris," The Bookman, LXIX (July, 1929), p. 508.
10. Introduction to McTeague (Rinehart editions, New York, 1950), p. xv.
11. Parrington, p. 331.
12. p. 331.
13. p. 1027.
14. loc. cit.

friend, Marcus, tells of his love for Trina. His speech indicates that he is overwhelmed by the complications of love. McTeague says:

> "I tell you, Mark, I can't help it. I don't know how it happened. It came on so slow that I was, that—that—that it was done before I knew it, before I could help myself. I know we're pals, us two, and I knew how how—how you and Miss Sieppe were. I know now, I knew then; but that wouldn't have made any difference. Before I knew it—it—it—there I was. I can't help it. I wouldn't 'a' had ut happen for anything, if I could 'a' stopped it, but I don' know, it's something that's just stronger than you are, that's all. She came there—Miss Sieppe came to the parlors there three or four times a week, and she was the first girl I had ever known,—and you don' know! Why, I was so close to her I touched her face every minute, and her mouth, and smelt her hair and her breath—oh, you don't know anything about it. I can't give you any idea. I don' know exactly myself; I only know how I'm fixed. I—I—it's been done; it's too late, there's no going back. Why, I can't think of anything else night and day. It's everything. It's—it's—oh, it's everything! I—I—why, Mark, it's everything—I can't explain." He made a helpless movement with both hands.[15]

The entire conversation with Marcus over Trina indicates a certain amount of pessimism in McTeague. Before he begins his tirade, "McTeague began dimly to feel that life was too much for him. How had it all come about?. . .It was more than McTeague could bear. The situation had got beyond him."[16]

There is a pessimistic attitude throughout the book.

15. Norris, McTeague, p. 40.
16. Ibid., p. 39.

McTeague, especially when talking of his love affair with Trina, frequently remarks that life is futile and useless. There is a marked futility in the Zerkow and Maria subplot and in the entire novel, which seems to leave the reader with a sense of the uselessness of life.

In the final analysis one might be tempted to feel that this is an entirely pessimistic novel. It is true that Norris is concerned with determinism, which is nearly always pessimistic, and with the pessimism of black romanticism. But the chief romantic qualities found in Norris' fascistic display rescue the novel from complete pessimism. This fascism (to be taken up in the next chapter) advocates an elemental individualism which saves the novel from plunging into the depths of discouragement and despair. It must be remembered, however, that the novel, naturalistic as it is, does not become highly optimistic either.

Nevertheless, Norris is not disciplining himself in a completely naturalistic objective approach. Rather than reporting the episode as a bystander, Norris appears to delve into the subconscious of McTeague and relates the incident as an occurrence having a drastic, demoralizing effect on the hero. But a thorough examination of the novel reveals that "nothing is more remarkable in the book than the detachment with which Norris saw [the life in San Francisco]."[17] And "by the time he had finished McTeague, he was to learn more thoroughly the need of a completely detached attitude."[18]

17. Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 102.
18. Walker, p. 99.

This objectivity, this separateness, is one of the tasks of the naturalist writer. It becomes, at times, an extremely difficult task, and later in his career Norris became more and more subjective.[19]

That Norris never blamed any of the characters in McTeague for their actions also seems quite obvious. Marcus is never criticized for his part in the tragedy, nor is McTeague, or Trina. In the subplot, Zerkow and Maria go blameless. And, after all, since they had no control over their lives, since their lives were determined by heredity, environment and chance, how could they be blamed? This non-judgementiveness of Norris is related to his other attempts at objectivity.

Even though he tried to maintain the naturalistic creed, Norris, at times, falls into the romantic trap of cheap sentimentality and melodrama. The two most obvious occasions—the love affair of Old Grannis and Miss Baker and the pursuit in the desert—have already been mentioned and need no more comment. Perhaps Norris was working on some psychological idea in the portrayal of McTeague's sixth sense. But McTeague has no idea of who or what the enemy is, and he cannot control the inner urge of flight. If Norris were trying to introduce a psychological approach on the principle of fear of pursuit, it never comes off for the reader, and the whole episode sinks to melodrama.[20]

19. In speaking about The Octopus, Marchand says: "The naturalists laid out a very severe course when by committing themselves to moral aloofness they attempted to deny themselves the luxury of blaming wrongdoers. Not to blame is too much for human nature; not to believe that effects must follow their cause is too much for human reason...It need not surprise that Norris should blame some of his characters, but only that he should be so maladroit as to blame the wrong ones" (p. 155).

20. Perhaps the most melodramatic of Norris' important novels are The Pit and The Octopus. In The Pit, the whole story centers around a sentimental love affair; in The Octopus, Vanamee is a mystic who can

Perhaps Norris can be criticized for not adhering completely to the rules of the naturalists, rules which he apparently prescribed for himself. At any rate, he was attempting to help establish a trend toward realism which was so completely absent in American literature before the appearance of the works of Stephen Crane, Hamlin Garland, and Jack London.

> [Indeed], the career of so aggressive a naturalist as Frank Norris was to prove that an American novelist had to grope over Stevenson in order to reach Zola, and that the violence of Wild West stories was the only available introduction to the violence of naturalism—the violence of the modern mind. Indeed, Norris's mind was to suggest that romanticism had not yet even begun to express itself fully in America when it slipped into naturalism.[21]

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attract the attention of another from a long distance through a process not entirely different from mental telepathy.

21. Kazin, On Native Grounds, pp. 16-17.

Chapter V
McTeague and Violence

The period in which Norris wrote was an era of change. Industrial expansion, scientific advancements, and imperialism marked the thought of the great nations of the world.

> The gusto of American life had not yet died down with the spread of factories and the settlement of the last frontier; and it now welled up in one last tumultuous fling. Everyone had gusto in the period, or tried to catch Roosevelt's gusto. The Wobblies had it, the muckrakers lived on it, novelists like Frank Norris and Jack London and Upton Sinclair had it overwhelmingly. It was this that gave life to the new spirit of insurgence and carried it in all directions. The generation dominated by the dream of reform was a generation fascinated by imperialism; the period of Socialism's greatest growth in America was the same period that saw the worship of brute strength and talk of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. Roosevelt, who attacked the trusts and admired the Kaiser, railed against "malefactors of great wealth" and out of the self-consciousness of his own search for health preached "the strenuous life," set the tone. Just as Frank Norris, who wrote the most powerful novel in The Octopus, worshipped bigness everywhere else, so even a leading Socialist propagandist like Jack London found no difficulty in preaching Marxian Socialism and Nietzsche's Superman at the same time.
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> . . .
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> It was the shadow of power, of force, that lay over the period, as Frank Norris had forecast in McTeague and The Octopus and Vandover and the Brute. . .Roosevelt and Norris alike were fascinated by

"vitality."[1]

Men like Darwin and his theory of evolution, Nietzsche and the misinterpretation of his ideas of superman, and Kipling with his philosophy of "the White Man's Burden," were beginning to make an impact on all nations of the world. The idea of the superior class was being expressed by many, and men like Joseph Chamberlain in England, Theodore Roosevelt in the United States, and Emperor William II of Germany seemed closely allied in their attitudes toward imperialism. There was confusion in the many ideas and ideals which were circulating around the world. People were striving for a moral sense, but condoned the many abuses of power, supremacy and imperialism. "At the turn of the century, American magazines were becoming sensitive, in their columns of opinion, to Spencer, Zola, Ibsen, Tolstoy, and Nietzsche. There was a skeptical and pessimistic mood in the air; and for their new hopes men turned to science, with its 'survival of the fittest,' and sanctioning of hedonism."[2]

Perhaps no world figure attracted more attention than Friedrich Nietzsche with his philosophy of the "Superman." In the late nineteenth century his works, though slowly and painfully becoming recognized, were beginning to demand a certain degree of respect. His important thoughts and ideas were, however, being misinterpreted by his readers. Perhaps much of the blame for this misinterpretation can be traced to Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche. For, while Nietzsche, hopelessly mad, awaited death at his mother's house,

1. Kazin, On Native Grounds, pp. 93-94.
2. Hartwick, p. 46.

> his sister—under the same roof—
> employed her considerable propagan-
> distic talents in the service of
> that Teutonic "Christianity" and
> chauvinistic racism which Nietzsche
> had loathed as "scabies of the heart."
> (FW377) and for which he had bitterly
> denounced Wagner and—his sister.[3]

It might be concluded that this philosophy which has been associated with the name Nietzsche, is actually a deliberate misreading of his works by his sister who took it upon herself to present these ideas to the world as being the words of her brother. But it was she and her husband who were the imperialists, not Nietzsche himself. Further, "Nietzsche did not consider the Germans a master race. . .On the other hand it is of course true that the Nazis did quote Nietzsche in their own behalf and that Nietzsche did speak of a master race."[4]

According to one early interpretation of Nietzsche, his basic proposition is that "a moral value is not something which we must necessarily accept; it is something which we create, and which to the best of our power we induce or compel others to acknowledge."[5] This German philosophy reached round the world, and philosophers in England and America embraced its teachings.

For Nietzsche, as for Zola, science was supreme. He believed that man had ascended from lower animals, and his prime interest was to teach the world to breed bigger and better men until eventually there would exist a world of supermen. "At first Nietzsche seems to

3. Walter A. Kaufman, Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist (Princeton, 1950), p. 4.
4. Ibid., p. 249.
5. Herbert Leslie Stewart, Nietzsche and the Ideals of Modern Germany (London, 1915), p. 23.

have thought of the superman as a single individual: he repeatedly speaks of Napoleon. Gradually, however, superman passed into super-species. Of the evolution [which he prescribed], there were apparently to be three stages: first, an aristocracy to rule all Europe; next, a new European race of 'higher men;' and finally the race of superman."[6]

> Nietzsche makes large ethical use of the Darwinian formula. He points out that among individuals Nature tends to kill off the sickly, the less fit both in body and in mind; she would preserve the sturdy and robust: These in turn were more likely to beget a race that is physically desirable. What disease and failure did in the life-struggle of individuals, war must do in the conflict of nations. For a people, too, might become effete, anaemic, unworthy of its place; it was dispossessed by a hardier, a more masterful stock, and to complain of the injustice of such things was to be misled by conventional morality.
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> . . .
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> Superman is to be physiologically perfect, strong, self-reliant, self-assertive; he is to be spiritually a passionate lover of life, no dreamer about other worlds, fulfilling himself to the full here and now. . .Superman's apparent harshness is a benevolent spirit in disguise; after all, was it not mercy which would stamp out the maimed combatants in life's struggle as one shoots a wounded horse on the battlefield? Was it not a choice between death, swift, painless, curative, and death long drawn out, racking, hopeless? And was not the benevolence still clearer toward that wretched progeny which might inherit the feebleness of such ancestors?[7]

One might well wonder how a philosophy such as this could

6. Ernest Barker, M.A., "Nietzsche and Treitschke: The Worship of Power in Modern Germany," Oxford Pamphlets: 1914, IV (London, 1914), p.13.
7. Stewart, pp. 97-101.

have such far-reaching effects and attract so many admirers. But Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche was able to win many converts to what she would have liked people to believe was the true Nietzsche cause. Though twentieth-century research has thrown new light on the situation, it was the common belief that Nietzsche and his contemporaries "lived and thought and taught in the New Germany which sprang from the greatness of 1866 and 1870. They caught the spirit, and they helped to make the spirit, of [the] new Germany. . .Power, more power, and always power—this was the gospel which they found, and preached."[8]

One can find traces of these mistaken ideas in much of Norris' work, but it is difficult to prove that Norris was consciously trying to follow the scheme outlined by Nietzsche, or that of Nietzsche's sister, or neither. Whether or not Norris had ever been interested in the work of the German philosopher may never be known, but Norris certainly must have known about Nietzsche and his work. His author-friend, William Dean Howell's "had read a paper on Nietzsche to a fugitive literary club in 1885,"[9] and surely Norris must have come into contact, at some time or another, with the ideas which people believed were advocated by Nietzsche.

Germany and the false interpreters of Nietzsche were not alone in these beliefs. In an attempt to qualify a statement concerning Nietzsche as an imperialist, an early critic says, "it may be argued that the Germans who enlisted Nietzsche on the side of Prussian Imperi-

8. Barker, p. 5.
9. Thomas Beer, The Mauve Decade: American Life at the End of the Nineteenth Century (Garden City, 1926), p. 191.

alism flagrantly misread him. That is possible; but the trouble is that no human being can say how he is to be read aright."[10] With writers of other lands, exponents of the same theme, there is not this difficulty.

> [In England] new interest in imperialism expressed itself in various ways, but most obviously in the speeches of public officials and in the writings of men like Rudyard Kipling. Kipling's words made British Imperialism appear a noble cause, in which Great Britain, as part of the Anglo-Saxon race, performed her God-given task of world leadership, gaining for what he called "the lesser breeds without the law," their proper share of human rights. According to Kipling, the British as imperialists, had no easy task; theirs was "the white man's burden," taking them to far countries, to hazardous climates. Imperialism in this guise appealed to British love of adventure, to British interest in the privations and training which go with the playing of games; and to British pride.
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> . . .
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> Those who, like Joseph Chamberlain and Cecil Rhodes, were the champions of vigorous imperialism, began to see the possibilities of weakness in the British position, if Great Britain must hold her vast empire in the face of a world entirely hostile. Champions of this sort therefore began to talk of uniting some two or three great powers in a single colonizing, and, as they called it, civilizing course of action. For these men the natural bond of alliance was between Great Britain and Germany or Great Britain and the United States. They glorified Teutonic and Anglo-Saxon civilization, as we may well remember by recalling the Rhodes scheme for education,

10. William Archer, "Fighting a Philosophy," Oxford Pamphlets: 1914-1915, XIV (London, 1915), p. 5.

> which set up the Rhodes scholarships intended for the common education at Oxford of scholars from the United States, the British Empire and Germany.[11]

Early in his life, Frank Norris came into contact with the works of Kipling, and "there was a part of him that believed in Anglo-Saxon supremacy."[12] In Norris' personal writings it is obvious that "Kipling, who was discovered by Americans in 1890, became Norris's new literary idol late in his freshman year, and, from the moment of the Anglo-Indian's apotheosis, he 'remained his adored and venerated author.' "[13]

Norris did not happen to be one of a minority in America who felt that imperialism was a moral act,

> for with the Spanish war we had taken our place among the imperialistic powers and were undergoing a phase of noisy belligerence. . .A popular leader like Theodore Roosevelt was preaching what he called "the strenuous life" and the need of "the big stick." "Thank God," he exclaimed, "for the iron in the blood of our fathers. . .," and he proceeded to heap scorn on the "timid man, the lazy man, . . .the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues. . .whose soul is incapable of feeling the mighty lift that thrills 'stern men with empires in their brains.' "[14]

Norris was probably not so concerned with imperialism as

11. Frederick George Marcham, A History of England, Revised edition (New York, 1950), pp. 722, 755.
12. Kazin, "Three Pioneer Realists," p. 4.
13. Walker, pp. 67-68.
14. Marchand, pp. 102-103. Marchand quotes Roosevelt's words from a speech delivered to the Hamilton Club in Chicago on April 10, 1899. The speech was printed in The Strenuous Life (New York, 1901), pp. 5-7.

such as he was for the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon race and the need for a virile generation of he-men. He himself wrote that "the United States in this year of grace of nineteen hundred and two does not want and does not need Scholars, but Men—Men made in the mould of the Leonard Woods and the Theodore Roosevelts, Men such as Colonel Waring, Men such as Booker Washington."[15] Early in his college days, Frank Norris, as a young dandy, exhibited more than a mild interest in the rough and tumble collegiate sports of that generation.

> It was in his attitude towards college sports that Norris's attitude waxed strongest. His admiration for the "red-blooded he-man" became a form of hero worship. . .A football game was to him a dramatic struggle where two teams, like armies, faced each other and shed blood in noble strife, and captains constantly met situations demanding quick decisions and shrewd thinking, . . . [and] the clasp of the hand of one particularly massive player convinced him of the presence of a superman.[16]

Violence became a part of Norris' life and work. "He plucked from the naturalist creed chiefly its delight in violence."[17] Norris wrote: "We are all Anglo-Saxon enough to enjoy the sight of a fight, would go a block or so out of the way to see one, or be a dollar or so out of pocket. But let it not be these jointed manikins worked with a thread. At least let it be Mr. Robert Fitzsimmons or Mr. James Jeffries."[18]

Norris took an active part in the Spanish-American War, and

15. Responsibilities of the Novelist, p. 265.
16. Walker, pp. 64-65.
17. Kazin, "Three Pioneer Realists," p. 3.
18. Responsibilities of the Novelist, p. 19.

apparently the idea of a super-race of Anglo-Saxons made a deep impression on the mind of the war correspondent.

> The simple intensity of the surrender in the fields, an intensity which brought a lump to Norris's throat, was replaced by a savage exultation as he galloped into the captured city. Here was something more akin to the brutal spirit. "There was no thought of humanitarian principles then. The war was not a 'crusade,' we were not fighting for Cubans, it was not for disinterested motives that we were there, sabered and revolvered and carbined. Santiago was ours—was ours, ours by the sword we had acquired, we, Americans, with no one to help—and the Anglo-Saxon blood of us, the blood of the race that has fought its way out of a swamp in Friesland, conquering and conquering and conquering, on to the westward, the race whose blood instinct is the acquiring of land, went galloping through our veins to the beat of our horses' hoofs. . .We rode on there at a gallop through the crowded streets of the fallen city. . .triumphant, arrogant, conquerors."[19]

But war was not all glory and triumph even to Norris. In a letter to Ernest Peixotto written in August, 1898, Norris relates some of the brutalities of war. There is not the triumphant tone of the arrogant conqueror as Norris tells of the starving children, the young girls of fourteen and fifteen, who were raped and butchered, the hospitals filled with cries of agony from wounded soldiers, and the looks of bitter despair in the eyes of the older people. And "in a couple of days Norris was on his way out to California to attempt to

19. Walker, p. 199. Walker fails to give the source of the quotes from Norris, but they probably come from one of the numerous letters written by Norris, which Walker uses as source material for his biography.

forget the details of his first-hand contact with naturalism. It was to take him more than three weeks to regain his old enthusiasm."[20]

In his written work, Norris was able to capture and hold the vitality of his age. He "is by every right the founder of the red-blooded school in America. A virile fiction fitted the mood of the moment."[21] Norris applies many of the theories and ideas of his mind and of his age to the literature which he wrote.

In stature, McTeague resembles the type of man which Nietzsche might well have admired.

> Polk Street called him the "Doctor" and spoke of his enormous strength. For McTeague was a young giant, carrying his huge shock of blond hair six feet three inches from the ground; moving his immense limbs, heavy with ropes of muscles, slowly, ponderously. His hands were enormous, red, and covered with a fell of stiff yellow hair; they were hard as wooden mallets, strong as vises, the hands of the old-time car-boy. Often he dispensed with forceps and extracted a refractory tooth with his thumb and finger. His head was square-cut, angular; the jaw salient, like that of the carnivora.[22]

Trina finds little to admire in McTeague, save his physical size and strength which often frightens her. Trina, from a distance, can easily ignore McTeague's humble wooing, "but he had only to take her in his arms, to crush down her struggle with his enormous strength, to subdue her, conquer her by sheer brute force, and she gave up in an

20. Walker, p. 202.
21. Marchand, p. 102.
22. Norris, McTeague, p. 2.

instant."[23] This Trina cannot understand. Never with Marcus did she feel so overwhelmed, never before did the presence of such brute strength arouse such passions within her. Frequently Trina reminds her husband to "love me, love me big!"

Size and strength and a desire to be dominated by one possessing these qualities are not the only fascistic elements in the novel. McTeague, though usually slow, ponderous, and dull, is often aroused to passionate exhibitions of violence. When Marcus breaks his pipe in the coffee-joint, McTeague becomes uncontrollable, but because Marcus leaves immediately after the attack on McTeague's life, the blonde giant is unable to give physical vent to his emotions. At the picnic, however, Marcus, by biting McTeague's ear in a wrestling match, finally arouses McTeague until McTeague breaks Marcus' arm.

After McTeague loses his right to practice dentistry, he begins to drink, and "it was curious to note the effect of the alcohol upon the dentist. It did not make him drunk, it made him vicious. So far from being stupefied, he became, after the fourth glass, active, alert, quick-witted, even talkative; a certain wickedness stirred in him then; he was intractable, mean; and when he had drunk a little more heavily than usual, he found a certain pleasure in annoying and exasperating Trina, even in abusing and hurting her."[24] Trina is often awakened by McTeague's pinching her. The huge beast often derives pleasure from cuffing his wife about the ears or by grinding and crunching Trina's fingers between his powerful teeth. McTeague,

23. Norris, McTeague, p. 65.
24. Ibid., p. 223.

when he bites Trina's fingers for money or for personal pleasure, is always ingenious enough to remember which are the sorest.

"And in some strange, inexplicable way this brutality made Trina all the more affectionate; aroused in her a morbid, unwholesome love of submission, a strange, unnatural pleasure in yielding, in surrendering herself to the will of an irresistable, virile power."[25]

Frequently Trina visits with Maria Macapa who is often the victim of the cruel brutality of her husband, Zerkow. Maria and Trina relate to each other the latest violence of their husbands, and they seem to find a strange pleasure in boasting of the aggressive spirit of their husbands, each trying to prove that her own husband is the more violent.

Finally Trina's fingers become infected with blood poison, and McTeague leaves Trina and finds a job with a piano-moving firm, where his size and strength are put to use. Here, the young giant frightens his fellow piano movers, and finally returns to kill Trina.

The ending of the novel, though it is a scene of defeat, shows McTeague's defiant and virile nature. McTeague, handcuffed to Marcus' dead body, is left to die. "All about him, vast interminable, stretched the measureless leagues of Death Valley, [but], McTeague remained stupidly looking around him, now at the distant horizon, now at the ground, now at the half-dead canary chittering feebly in its little gilt prison."[26]

25. Norris, McTeague, p. 227.
26. Ibid., pp. 323-324.

This last scene, fatalistic as it is, saves the book from the bleak, barren pessimism of black romanticism and the despair of determinism. McTeague, destined for death in a barren wasteland, is not grovelling. Like the strong individual which Norris intended him to be, McTeague faces death as he faced life, defiant, proud, and questioning. He does not become bitter, nor does he realize the tragic position he is in. He never feels the pangs of repentance for his treatment of Trina, which could have easily plunged the novel into cheap sentimentality. Instead, McTeague is just barely rescued from becoming a character in a naturalistic or black romantic story by his own elemental individualism which plays a marked role in the closing lines.

Only in the name of his hero, and in his complete domination of Trina Sieppe, does Norris imply the supremacy of the Anglo-Saxon. In fact, Trina's inheritance as well as Marcus' is from the Teutonic race. Maria Macapa is a Mexican, and Zerkow is a Jew, but these people are not dominated by another group. They are finally destroyed by the naturalistic elements which are also the chief causes of the tragedy of Trina and McTeague.[27]

27. Marchand shows that, in The Octopus, Norris is more concerned with the superiority of the Anglo-Saxons. Marchand feels that "if the Anglo-Saxon is superior in conquest he is also superior in the human virtues. He may be filled with a fine brutal arrogance, but he does not know how to be wantonly cruel." Marchand cites the rabbit drive, conducted by many Anglo-Saxons who cannot bear to watch the rabbits being destroyed. This unpleasant task is left to the hot-blooded Mexicans and degenerate Spaniards who seem to derive pleasure from clubbing to death the hordes of imprisoned rabbits (p. 133).

Chapter VI
Conclusion

C. Hartley Grattan, in a review of Franklin Walker's biography of Norris, says, "there is no way under heaven, except by the use of Procrustean methods, of fitting Norris into any neat formula."[1] This seems to be true in all of Norris' work, and even in McTeague, where he tried to follow the strict code of the naturalists, we have seen how Norris resorts to romanticism and fascism.

One might divide the American fiction of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century into two schools—that of naturalism and another which might be called the red-blooded school.

> The naturalistic novel may be red-blooded in so far as it gives prominence to brutality and violent action, [but] the red-blooded novel is not naturalistic. Terrible things happen to the people of the former, as Norris remarked; no matter how strong, they are crushed by yet more powerful forces of environment, or betrayed by heredity. The strong man of the latter causes terrible things to happen to others who may stand in the way of his quest for power and domination.[2]

We have seen McTeague brutally torture Trina in his desire to subdue her penurious nature; we have watched McTeague's counterpart, Zerkow, in the subplot, severely punish Maria for not delivering a gold service which does not exist. Perhaps, then, this novel could

1. "Frank Norris," The Nation, CXXXV (November 30, 1932), p. 535.
2. Marchand, p. 103.

be called a "red-blooded" novel, but if we look further, we can see that Norris again confuses the issue. For Norris' strong man, McTeague, not only causes terrible things to happen to others, but he is in turn destroyed by the more powerful forces of heredity and environment which should be characteristic of the naturalistic novel.

In the final analysis, it must be admitted that Norris was striving for a realistic fiction, and he comes close to attaining realism in his pictures of the lower class San Francisco society, in his accounts of the proceedings in the dental parlor, and in the accounts of the farcical stage entertainment viewed with enjoyment by the people of the city. Norris' close association with William Dean Howells, an early realistic writer, who "had absorbed his realism from [many Europeans], Mark Twain, and Henry James,"[3] helped him to work toward truth in fiction. And truth, scientific fact, was the quality that mattered with Norris in his personal struggle with realistic portrayals of life.

But, like many literary terms, "there has been no word in the field of literary criticism that has been so misused as the word realism; a misuse nowhere better illustrated than in its application to the work of Frank Norris. Even the tremendous influence of Zola could not make a realist of him."[4] It might be said that "naturalism was the classicism of the nineteenth century, [but] Flaubert, Zola, Stephen Crane, and Frank Norris were all suckled in the romantic tradition; they turned to naturalism to disown romantic expansiveness, lavishness

3. Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 7.
4. Dobie, p. 423.

of color, and the inherent belief that man is capable of molding his own destiny."[5]

In addition to the strange mixture of stark naturalistic realism and romanticism which Norris uses in McTeague, there is another element of equal importance. That is the idea of a domineering race of men. "One does not have to read The Responsibilities of the Novelist to realize that Frank Norris, like the best and biggest of the men and women he represents, [advocates] the Square Deal. . .on the broadest possible basis."[6] Nowhere is this fact more evident than in The Octopus, but McTeague also contains its share of the progressive attitude of the big men of the day who represented the Square Deal. "Frank Norris, who died on the eve of the Progressive period in 1902, must yet seem always so representative of it."[7]

After the affair with Marcus and McTeague in the coffee-joint, violence reigns supreme throughout the novel. Norris, seeming to follow the then-prevalent interpretation of Nietzsche, advocates "power, power, and more power." Even in his own life, Norris "had more than his share of the facile Nordicism of his day. . .To that overflowing vitality, however, he owed the extraordinary feeling for the common brutality of life that makes his best novel, McTeague, one of the greatest works of the modern imagination."[8]

In McTeague can be found a curious blend of naturalism,

5. Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 88.
6. John Curtis Underwood, Literature and Insurgency: Ten Studies in Racial Evolution (New York, 1914), p. 131.
7. Kazin, On Native Grounds, p. 97.
8. Ibid., p. 99.

romanticism, and fascism. "In [Norris'] work realism and romance, art and journalism, art and business, rebellion and tradition, all come into conflict."[9] Conflicting as these elements might be, Norris tries to unite them; naturalistic as the book might be, McTeague is "a melodrama, as all Norris's books were melodramas; but the violence was something more than his usual exhalation of boyish energy; it supported a conception of life."[10] For "the brute beneath the veneer of civilization [is] . . .the essence of the brutal life of McTeague."[11]

Norris embarked on a difficult task in trying to embody all of these conflicting elements into one novel, which he hoped to render in naturalistic terms. The final impression of the novel seems to leave the reader with a feeling that McTeague's life has been determined for him by his heredity, environment, and the chance happenings of life. For McTeague, life is often utterly useless, and he is so often completely overwhelmed that he is powerless to better his condition. In the end, however, the novel is rescued from pessimistic depths of despair by the scene of a powerful man, valiantly, though stupidly, facing an impending death of cruel and harsh starvation and thirst on the floor of the blistering and barren Death Valley. Strangely enough, "Norris' elementalism derives from. . .Zola and the naturalists on the one hand, and from Kipling (and to some extent from Stevenson) on the other."[12]

A well-written, craftsmanlike piece of art it may not be.

9. Grattan, "Frank Norris," The Bookman, p. 506.
10. Kazin, On Native Grounds, pp. 101-102.
11. Walker, p. 73.
12. Marchand, p. 103.

Critics have been more than happy, it seems, to point out its numerous flaws and violations of literary technique. Nevertheless, Norris' two important novels, McTeague and The Octopus, helped to rescue American fiction from the impregnable barriers of the "genteel tradition" to which it seemed everlastingly condemned. Even though The Octopus and The Pit often stoop to sentimentalism, social reform, and cheap romanticism, McTeague stands out as a trail blazer for later writers who developed more completely Norris' realistic detail and objectivity.

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